On Art's Romance with Design

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There always has been a rift between art and design in our culture. Yes, there has. Purists submit that the distance between art and design has to be preserved in the name of specificity; in an age where there is a multimedia meltdown, they warn that art must take care not to relinquish what is specific to it. Meanwhile, more nonchalant players insist that, on the contrary, to survive and be relevant in such an age, art needs to be more gregarious—it must reach out beyond its own confines—and design is surely one of its more suitable bedfellows. The sense of specificity that comes with an awareness of a discipline's history, however, is as important to design art as the ability to make connections between disciplines. So perhaps both groups are partially misguided.

Project, an installation by Jorge Pardo at Dia:Chelsea in New York in 2000, is a good example of why a comprehensive knowledge of the different disciplines is important. Pardo refashioned Dia:Chelsea's ground-floor gallery, bookstore, and lobby in such a way that integrates these three formerly discrete areas into a flowing stream of vibrant tiles. Thus, to experience the installation is to be catapulted into a vertiginous world enveloping both the art gazer and book buyer alike. By way of reprieve, both ends of the space are coated with pastel-colored murals conceived by Pardo, and an adjacent office space is filled with his low-hanging lamps. A full-scale clay model of Volkswagen's most recent Beetle took center stage in the gallery, while in the bookshop there is a seating area replete with delicately arranged chairs designed by Marcel Breuer and Alvar Aalto in the 1920s and 1930s. Pardo effectively preserved a sense of specificity in the installation through the decisive articulation of each space and object while, at the same time, striving to be gregarious by drawing the objects that constitute the installation from across art and design.

Such installations have rendered design crucial to an understanding of contemporary art. So, too, have the flurry of recent group exhibitions devoted to design art. These include *What If? Art on the Verge of Architecture and Design,* at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, 2000; *Against Design,* at the Institute for Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 2000; *Beau-Monde: Toward a Redeemed Cosmopolitanism,* Site Santa-Fe, 2001–2; and *Trespassing: Houses x Artists* at the MAK Center for Art and Architecture, Los Angeles, 2003. Despite these exhibitions, extended critical commentaries on the trend have been noticeably lacking.

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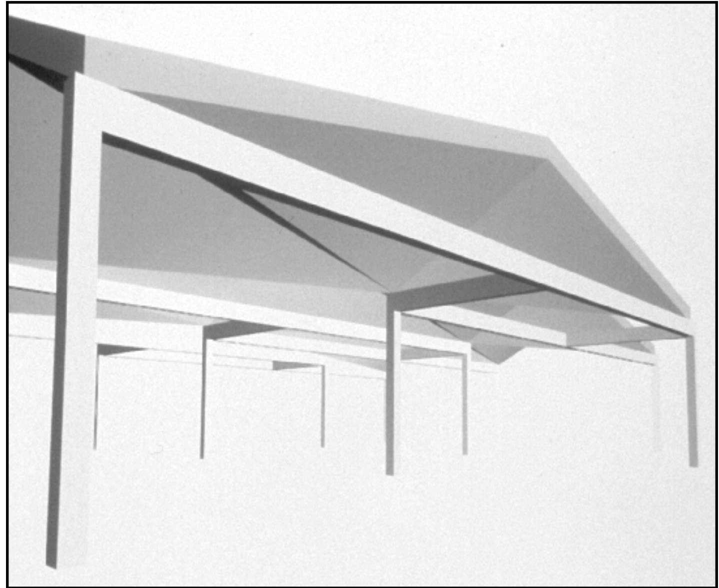
Figure 1
TRESPASSING: Houses x Artists,
Jim Isermann, Jim Isermann House,
Digital image. Courtesy of the artist and
OpenOffice, MAK Center, 2002.



Vilém Flusser, the philosopher, and witty and erudite commentator on design, devoted an entire essay to a simple explanation of the etymology of the word. "'Design' is derived from the Latin *signum,* meaning 'sign,' and shares the same ancient root. Thus, etymologically, design means 'de-sign.'"[1] Flusser subsequently elaborated on other words used in the same context, such as "technology." "The Greek word *techne* means art and, is related to *tekton,* a carpenter. The basic idea here is that wood is a shapeless material to which the artist, the technician, gives form, thereby causing the form to appear in the first place."[2] In this account, the words "design," "machine," "technology," and "art" are closely related, one term being unthinkable without the others. But modern bourgeois culture of the mid-nineteenth century made a sharp distinction between the world of the arts and that of technology. As a result, culture has been split into two, mutually exclusive branches: one scientific, quantifiable and "hard," the other aesthetic, evaluative, and "soft." This unfortunate split became irreversible towards the end of the nineteenth century and, in the end, the word "design" came to form a bridge between the two. In Flusser's late-twentieth-century reading, design indicates the site where art and technology meet to produce new forms of culture, and so the role that design plays is crucial to the vitality of the arts.

But artists and critics have had a field day denying the impact of design on art. Intrepid formalists from Roger Fry to Michael Fried have tended to bring to the foreground what they term the "design" of a work while, at the same time, paradoxically playing down the design context—tricky, given that much of what they support comes from a narrow reading of the 1920s Bauhaus school. For them, design is a structure that can carry the artist's aesthetic conviction. In no way

1 Vilém Flusser, "About the Word *Design,*" *The Shape of Things: A Philosophy of Design* (London and New York: Reaktion Books, 1999), 17.
2 Ibid.

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is it respectable in itself. Conceptual artists of the late-1960s likewise tended to be evasive about design, with the result that many of their arguments also appear weak, especially considering their substantial recourse to industrial design and typography. To the extent that, without design, the work of both formalists and conceptual artists is inconceivable, it seems unfair that they refer to it in a pejorative sense. A key issue to keep in mind when thinking about design art is that all art is designed, even if it endeavors to appear otherwise. In the end, for artists, it is really just a matter of emphasis: to be overt or covert about an engagement with design. Of those artists to approach design, only the "pop artists" fully embraced it. Richard Artschwager openly admits that he started out as a furniture maker, Andy Warhol did not hide that he previously had been an illustrator, and the London-based Independent Group went so far as to include designers and architects. Even within pop there were some misgivings, however: Ed Ruscha published his graphic design work from the 1960s under the name of Eddie Russia, a pun on the political climate of the time, to be sure, but also on art's fear of design.

More exhilarating still was the strategic coyness towards design by the "minimalists." In the 1980s, Donald Judd ordered chairs and tables which were fabricated according to his specifications. Though they were eminently close in tone to the sculptures he had been producing since the early-1960s—sleek in structure, deadpan in facture—Judd endeavored to keep the two forms of his output distinct. So anxious was he about this divide and what it meant that he took great care to protect his double life. While hours were spent scheming away behind the scenes, Don the designer was rarely seen in public with Judd the artist because he foresaw that this could lead to all his output being exclusively contextualized within the design world. The consequence of this surely would have been that his occasional essays for *Home and Garden* on art and its relation to the interior would be taken as the cornerstone of his theoretical output, undesirable for a philosophy graduate accustomed to writing for *Artforum.* After all, Judd is an artist who occasionally turned his hand to design when he needed something to sit on, eat off, or live in—or simply something to make money from. According to Judd himself, he was in no way a designer per se.

To a more recent generation of artists, although it has the look of design, Judd's work does not implement any of the characteristics they associate with it, such as an open attitude towards working with different disciplines or the ambition to create conditions for the viewer to have a truly dialogistic experience. Artist Tobias Rehberger recently suggested that one of Judd's outdoor sculptures be temporarily refashioned into a bar in order to produce a new, collaborative artwork. The Judd Foundation turned the proposition down flat. Explaining the motivation behind projects such as Rehberger's, artist Liam Gillick said: "In common with many people of my generation, I embraced certain aspects of design as a part of a critique of estab-

3 Liam Gillick, "The Semiotics of the Built World," *Liam Gillick: The Woodway,* exhibition catalogue, Whitechapel Art Gallery (London 2002), 81.

4 George Nelson, "Modern Decoration" in *George Nelson on Design* (London: The Architectural Press, 1979), 185.

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Figure 2
Liam Gillick, Big Conference Centre Limitation Screen, 1998.
Anodized aluminum, Plexiglas, 300x240 cm.

lished terms of judgement within an art context." [3] In the eyes of this generation of artists, Judd is no longer able to hold himself aloof from the design context.

But in the parlance of Judd's time, the problem with Gillick's spin on design and Rehberger's proposal is that a piece of high art would be turned into that much-maligned thing: good design. The term "good design" actually derives from an infamous annual exhibition of contemporary design trends mounted by The Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA) between the late-1940s and the mid-1950s in the hope that something of their aesthetic would make its way into the culture at large.

Designer and theorist George Nelson furnished an account of what good design looked like during this period, with particular reference to what he termed the "plywood and rubber plant school of good design." [4] With his tongue firmly in cheek, Nelson recounted how an architect of his acquaintance had bought a station wagon because he had designed a number of modern houses that needed to be published in the architectural press. Since his clients owned no modern furniture, in order to achieve the required interior shots, the architect was forced to load the station wagon with a photographer, his cameras and lights, a large rubber plant, and a few Aalto stools, armchairs, and tables. Nelson's story reveals how ubiquitous the notion of "good design" had become by the mid-1950s, and hence almost meaningless to cutting-edge designers and artists such as himself. Given this leveling-out of cultural territory, it makes sense that the term often was used by art critics seeking to disparage new art forms that they considered too smooth for their gritty, avant-garde tastes. For example, in the early-1960s, Clement Greenberg could say that he felt "back in the realm of Good Design" whenever he was in the presence of minimalist work.[5] By the same token, a few lines later, he also suggested that painters such as Ellsworth

5 Clement Greenberg, "Recentness of Sculpture" (1967) in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism,* Vol. 4, John O'Brian, ed. (Chicago and London: The Unviersity of Chicago Press, 1993), 254.

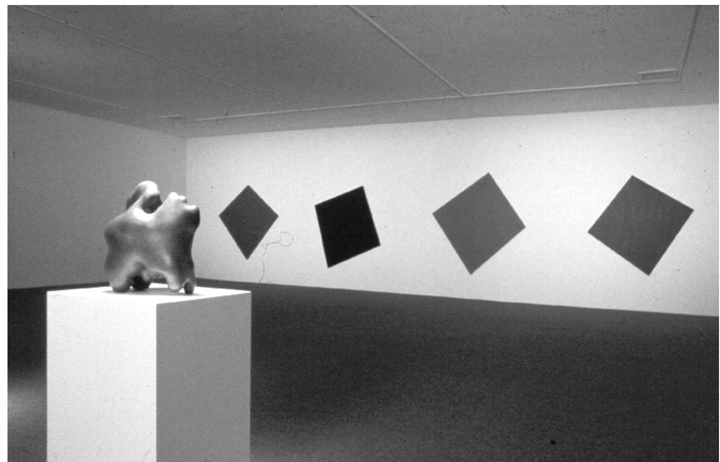

Figure 3
Kenneth Price, *Underhung* (1997) and Ellsworth Kelly, *Blue Black Red Green* (2000). SITE Santa Fe's 4th International Biennial *Beau Monde: Toward a Redeemed Cosmopolitanism*, July 14, 2001–January 6, 2002.

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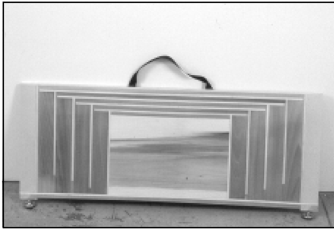

Figure 4
Joe Scanlon *Prop 2,* 2001.
Wood, fabric, metal, rubber, and lacquer.
17 x 40 x 11/2 inches (43.2 x 101.6 x 3.8 cm).

Kelly and Kenneth Noland set an example to be followed as they "rise above Good Design" while utilizing formal elements derived from design, in particular from the Bauhaus. Even though all this was many years ago, it came as no surprise when the most recent design art came to the attention of critics in the late-1990s that the same terminology was used again. According to some critics and artists, especially the ones still under the influence of Judd's generation, Pardo's work nestles easily within the confines of good design. And so, once again, the high art of one generation is seen as the good design of another.

The term "design art" only adds to the furor. Perhaps it erodes the ideological gulf between the disciplines too smoothly. Let it be clear from the outset then that it is a term derived from many of the contemporary artists associated with it. Joe Scanlan, for one, frequently peppers his felicitous essays on the subject with it. In a 2001 essay co-authored with Neal Jackson entitled "Please, Eat the Daisies," he furnishes the reader with a crisp explanation of the term: "Design art could be defined loosely as any artwork that attempts to play with the place, function, and style of art by commingling it with architecture, furniture, and graphic design."[6] The active development and use of the term "design art" by artists sharply differentiates it from, say, minimalism, a term its alleged exponents were none too happy with, since it was applied to their work by an external body, the critic. Sometimes the two words—"design" and "art"—are kept apart by artists, but just as frequently they are run together. In print, this appears to make a difference, but in actual fact it is only a semantic one and is not visible in their work. So there is no need to get too bound up in the term itself.

Most often when design art is discussed, it is in terms of the way it "transgresses" boundaries. But making too much of this particular issue is to befuddle an already complicated situation. For it is not so much that these artists transgress boundaries, as that they engage art and design in a romance which is of interest. The notion of "simultaneity" is useful here because the most enticing design artists are utterly flexible regarding the role they play, being content to work as designers and as artists at different times, although not always in the role or circumstances in which they would be expected to do so. Sonia Delaunay was the first to use the term in the 1920s. Perceiving the practices of certain artists from her time onward as simultaneous practices alleviates the necessity to think of design art as a fixed paradigm or movement. Instead, it can be thought of more as a tendency on the level of practice rather than a fixed theory.

The economy of the exchange between art and design also is worth considering. To artists, design is attractive because it provides a way to make money, to reach a larger audience, and to look stylish—not to mention having something to sit on and live in while you are making more design art. On the other hand, art entices designers,

6 Joe Scanlan, "Please, Eat the Daisies," *Art Issues* (January/February 2001): 26.

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because it is something you can acquire an attitude from if you want to appear profound while, at the same time, producing something to go on your wall.

Figure 5
Franz West *Knutschnische* 2000, Environment with work by West 2000, Steinbach, Gelatin 2000, mixed media dimensions variable.

Many of the considerations regarding this polemic turn on the way in which ornament and decoration relate to design art. Since the infamous 1908 essay "Ornament and Crime" written by Adolf Loos, there has been a tendency to assume that ornament, and with it the decorative effects of art, architecture, and design, are degenerate or are at the very least superfluous to what is required. In Loos's account, these effects were the products of the way in which exponents of the art nouveau style at the turn of the twentieth century tended to run the different disciplines together. Loos made a moral imperative out of his theory that disciplines must be kept apart in order to limit the decorative: "I have discovered the following truth and present it to the world: cultural evolution is equivalent to the removal of ornament from articles in daily use." [7] Not satisfied with stopping there with his drive to expunge ornament from his life, Loos even subjected his diet to the same relentless discipline: "The spectacular menus of past centuries, which all include decorations to make peacocks, pheasants and lobsters appear even tastier, produce the opposite effect on me. I walk through a culinary display with revulsion at the thought that I am supposed to eat these stuffed animal corpses. I eat roast beef." [8] This tendency continues today. In *Design and Crime (and Other Diatribes)*, Hal Foster bemoans the loss of specificity in the name of Loos's polemic against ornament. Loos's "anti-decorative dictate is a modernist mantra if ever there was one," Foster asserts, "and it is for the puritanical propriety inscribed in such words that postmodernists have condemned modernists like Loos in turn." [9] But Foster perceives that times have changed again, since "Maybe we are in a moment when distinctions between practices might be reclaimed or re-made." [10] The notion of specificity is played off against the tendency to work across disciplines and, on this occasion, specificity once again wins. So it is not difficult to understand from the remainder of the book that Foster takes things even further than Loos by clinging to a strict vegetarian-like diet of medium-specific art.

As a repercussion of how the terms of Loos's inquiry continue to dominate the entire debate, there is a necessity to recover the discourse about forms of design that accent the ornamental and decorative. It is no coincidence that this task is at the very center of the texts of some of the most unfashionably incisive critics who have written about the correspondence between art and design: John Ruskin, William Morris, and Oscar Wilde. The first two promoted a social agenda that was bound up with the aesthetic effects of ornamentation. Making a case for handcrafted design, they perceived how the divisions made between the arts of the "intellect"—architecture, sculpture, and painting—and those of the "decorative"—interior architecture and the crafts—were based on

7 Adolf Loos, "Ornament and Crime" (1908), *Programs and Manifestoes on Twentieth-Century Architecture,* Ulrich Conrads, ed. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1964), 20.
8 Ibid., 21.
9 Hal Foster, *Design and Crime (and Other Diatribes)* (London and New York: Verso, 2002), 14.
10 Ibid.

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a false presupposition. In his essay "The Lesser Arts," signed off in 1882, Morris asserts that his agenda is to study the subject that is the "great body of art, by means of which men have at all times more or less striven to beautify the familiar matters of everyday life." [11] Ruskin likewise insisted in 1859 that:

> There is no existing highest-order for art but is decorative. The best sculpture yet produced has been the decoration of a temple front—the best painting, the decoration of a room. Get rid, then, at once of any idea of Decorative art being a degraded or a separate kind of art.[12]

Wilde concurred with their insights, but skewed their methodologies to such an extent that his version charged that the frivolity that ornament encouraged could, at its most superlative, be transgressive; he alone elucidated how sensual freedom could ride on the back of an aesthetic flourish. *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* published in 1891, advocates such aesthetic reverie, and nowhere more effectively than in the opening scene:

> From the corner of the divan of Persian saddle-bags on which he was lying, smoking, as was his custom, innumerable cigarettes, Lord Henry Wotton could just catch the gleam of the honey-sweet and honey-coloured blossoms of a laburnum. And now and then the fantastic shadows of birds in flight flitted across the long tussore-silk curtains that were stretched in front of the huge window, producing a kind of momentary Japanese effect. In the centre of the room, clamped to an upright easel, stood the full-length portrait of a young man of extraordinary personal beauty.[13]

Wilde pans across myriad disciplines—including contemporary interior decoration, Japanese ornament, and avant-garde painting—in one eloquent swoop. Wilde, Morris, and Ruskin all were loosely associated with the arts and crafts movement in Britain in the late nineteenth century. In numerous ways, the so-called great avant-gardes that followed in the early twentieth century—De Stijl in The Netherlands, the Bauhaus in Germany, and the Russian constructivists—forwarded theories sympathetic to the art and design issue. Writings by the exponents of these movements pursued a much more exacting sense of how correlations between art and design could be pressed into service by utilizing a muscular theoretical program. In "The Theory and Organization of the Bauhaus" from 1923, Walter Gropius stated, "The Bauhaus strives to coordinate all creative effort, to achieve the unification of all training in art and design. The ultimate, if distant, goal of the Bauhaus is the collective work of art in which no barriers exist between the structural and the decorative arts." [14] As a result of Gropius's characteristically firm purchase on the situation, the flexibility and frivolity that Wilde's prose exhibits is limited. Decorative effects are discarded, and the

11 William Morris, "The Lesser Arts" (1882) in *Art in Theory: 1815–1900,* Charles Harrison, William Wood, and Jason Geiger, eds. (Cambridge, MA and London: Blackwells, 1998), 751.

12 John Ruskin, "The Decorative Arts" (1859) in *The Two Paths* (London: Gerorge Allen, 1956), 74–76.

13 Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) (London and New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 7.

14 Walter Gropius, "The Theory and Organization of the Bauhaus" (1923) in *Art in Theory: 1900–1990,* Charles Harrison and William Wood eds. (Cambridge, MA and London: Blackwells, 1993), 340.

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kinks are straightened out. Gropius's discourse allowed what, particularly in the U.S. became the avant-garde's aim of bringing the arts together, but the sense of flexibility that such a meeting ought to yield is forfeited—the running together of the arts became a dry theoretical program, almost as disagreeable as Loos's. As a result of the widespread dissemination of Bauhaus dogma, the speculative aspects of design and decoration were hampered, if not embarrassed, into silence until much later. Although the dialogue flourished in the 1960s, it was superseded by slices of grey neo-conceptualism right through to the mid-1990s, when these issues once again came under the spotlight of critical attention through the exhibitions mentioned earlier. This brings us to the present.

A more flexible approach towards design is crucial for art. Recovering discourses such as Wilde's on ornament is part and parcel of this project. So too is the recovery of the work of artists such as Henri Matisse. For it is no coincidence that Matisse is one of the few artists who moved all the way between pattern, with his easel painting, and architectural design, with his Chapel of the Rosary in Venice. Matisse's insouciant attitude towards design was noticeably far more speculative in nature than that of either Gropius's version of the Bauhaus or Loos, who both strove for mastery over it. Matisse's work is flexible enough to take inspiration from border disciplines, and yet strong enough to stimulate them in return. He always ensured that, rather than disappearing, boundaries between disciplines were only momentarily blurred. And it is precisely this emphasis on the transitory—that is, on the permeable over the solidly defined or, conversely, the completely erased—border that gives Matisse's art its potency today. It is also fitting then that Matisse should have the last word here with a statement from 1908—the same year as Loos's diatribe against ornament, no less—that ingeniously turns a painting into a piece of design without even sweating:

> What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity and serenity, devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter, an art that could be for every mental worker, for the businessman as well as the man of letters, for example, a soothing, calming influence on the mind, something like a good armchair that provides relaxation from fatigue.[15]

15 Henri Matisse, "Notes of a Painter" (1908) in *Matisse on Art*, Jack Flam, revision ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 42.

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